

Meningococcal Infection

What is meningococcal infection?

Meningococcal infection is a bacterial disease that occurs more frequently during the winter and spring. It can cause a bloodstream infection, **meningococcemia**, or a central nervous system infection, **meningitis**.

What is the difference between meningococcemia and meningitis?

Meningococcemia is an infection of the bloodstream (blood poisoning) by the meningococcal bacteria. Meningitis is an inflammation of the lining around the brain.

What causes meningitis?

Meningitis is usually the result of an infection by one of several types of viruses or bacteria. When bacteria called meningococci cause this infection, the disease is referred to as meningococcal meningitis.

Does the meningococci always cause meningitis?

No. Many people carry this bacteria in their nose and throat without any signs of illness. These well persons are known as asymptomatic carriers.

What are the symptoms of infection with meningococci?

Most people exposed to the meningococci do not show any symptoms of illness. A very small number of people may become ill with meningitis or blood poisoning. Meningitis causes symptoms of fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, and sometimes sleepiness or confusion. Blood poisoning is usually associated with fever, severe muscle aches, and chills. Both meningitis and blood poisoning may be associated with a characteristic rash.

How is the bacteria spread?

The meningococci are spread by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat of an infected person. Spread is almost always from a person who is not ill (an asymptomatic carrier). Spread of the bacteria is by close contact with an infected person. Close contact includes activities such as kissing and sharing drinking glasses, eating utensils, cigarettes, or toothbrushes. These bacteria do not survive for more than a few minutes on environmental surfaces (tables, chairs, clothing, etc.). Casual contacts such as occur in classrooms, work environments or office settings, or social situations are not considered risk factors for contracting the infection.

How long is a person contagious and how soon do the symptoms appear?

From the time a person is first infected until the bacteria is no longer present in the nose and throat, he or she may transmit the disease. Symptoms may appear two to ten days after exposure, but usually within five days.

Can infection with meningococci be treated?

Yes. Early recognition of this infection is very important. With appropriate treatment, the vast majority of patients recover without any problem. People who develop fever, headache, rash, and stiff neck should be evaluated immediately by a physician.

Should people who have been in contact with someone diagnosed with meningococcal illness receive an antibiotic even if they are not sick?

Only people who have been in close household and/or personal contact with the ill person need to receive an antibiotic. This antibiotic is given to eliminate the bacteria from the nose and throat of close contacts who may be infected with the organism and are carriers of the bacteria. Eliminating this bacteria from their noses and throats prevents them from spreading the bacteria to someone else. Close contacts are people who may have exchanged respiratory or oral secretions with an ill person through activities such as kissing and sharing drinking glasses, eating utensils, cigarettes, or toothbrushes. They include household members, intimate contacts, and day care center classmates. Casual contact such as occurs in classrooms or office settings is not usually significant enough to cause concern.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal infection?

A vaccine is available for certain strains of the bacteria. In the United States, it is not routinely recommended except for military recruits and for college freshmen who are living in dormitories. It is also used in outbreak situations and for persons who are traveling to areas of the world where high rates of the disease are known to occur. The vaccine takes at least a week after administration before protection is provided.

Where can I get more information?

You may contact your doctor or local health department if you would like more information.

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